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AUTHOR Mersand, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Perhaps because writing is a comparatively recent development in human history, it is more difficult to teach than any other aspect of communication. It is essential in teaching writing to enlist the interest and the pleasure of the pupil. Some ways to do this include: preceding the writing process with speaking and listening, providing for individual differences in interest and ability, providing as many enriching experiences as possible in and out of the classroom, discussing anything in the news that will interest the class, giving sufficient time for gestation of an idea, and allowing opportunities for sharing written work. Some principles of evaluation include doing it on a one-to-one basis, giving positive encouragement, looking for only a few errors at a time, having students judge each other's work, emphasizing content over mechanics, inspiring students' pride in their work, and rewarding excellence in writing as excellence is rewarded in other fields. The surroundings for good writing may be created by making the room as attractive as possible, providing alcoves for those who like to be alone while writing, and providing proper reference books. An effective writing teacher must grow with the subject by keeping up in reading and by participating in professional organizations. (TJ)

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THE MAGIC INGREDIENT IN THE TEACHING OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION: PRELUDE, THEME, AND VARIATIONS

by

Joseph Mersand
Associate Professor of Education
York College of the City University of New York

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THE MAGIC INGREDIENT IN THE TEACHING OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION:
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By Joseph Mersand
Associate Professor of Education
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I. PRELUDE: The Miracle of Language

How many of us, as we go through the mountains of papers each week, suffering various agonies and occasional ecstacies, ever stop to think what a miracle language really is? Let us take a few examples:

A. Adaptation of organs originally meant for eating and breathing for articulated speech.

Mankind is the only species that has done this. Dogs can bark and cats can meow, and cows can moo; but that is hardly considered articulated speech. We would not expect a dog to write a sonnet or a cat to sing a Lied by Schubert or an aria from a Wagnerian opera.

B. Mastery of the grammar of one's native tongue.

By the time a child is three, he or she has learned the basic grammar of his or her native tongue. Some learn it even at an earlier age. Without knowing what a subject, verb, or direct object means, an English-speaking child between the age of two or three has learned to say, "I want a drink," or "Push the button, Daddy," or "Take me home, Mama." If the child happens to be Japanese, he or she has learned to say, "Watakushi-wa seito desu" or "Anata-wa sensei desu," which is his way of saying, "I am a student"; "You are the teacher."

The English-speaking child has learned that the subject comes first in a declarative statement, the verb comes second, and the direct object, last. The Japanese child, on the other hand, has learned that the subject comes first; the predicate nominative, second; and the verb, last.

C. Mastery of vocabulary.

At the time the child enters the first grade in our American schools, he already understands the meanings of thousands of words. Estimates vary, but some experts would place the number as high as 10,000. Janet Moss, author of Insure That Your Child Will Read, places the estimate at 11,000 words to which he has been exposed. I have seen a figure as high as 20,000. Chaucer, the first great English poet and the greatest up to the time of Shakespeare, used less than 10,000 words.

D. The miracle of writing.

This mode of communication, historically speaking, is a comparatively new development. Man must have spoken for thousands of years before he learned to write. Whole civilizations have been forgotten because they left no written record. We know, for example, that the Spartans were a very brave people, but there is

not a single word of the Spartan language or any of its literature extant. We have read about nations in Biblical times, like the Jebuzites, the Midianites, the Philistines, etc. but there is hardly any trace of their culture because they left no written record. In fact, we know that there were civilizations that existed for hundreds of years about whose culture we know practically nothing because they left no written record of their accomplishments. The miracle of the development of writing, first through pictographs ; then through ideographs; and finally, through letters to make words, then sentences, this is indeed astonishing. Perhaps because it was a late development in civilization, it is therefore so much more difficult to teach written composition than any other aspect of English like speaking and listening and reading.

II. THEME: THE ESSENCE OF SUCCESS IN TEACHING WRITTEN COMPOSITSON

In the first century A.D., the great Rabbi Hillel was asked by a disciple to give the essence of the Pentateuch, while standing on one leg. He replied, after some reflection, " Do not do unto your neighbor what you do not wish your neighbor to do unto you. All else is commentary." In like manner, I shall dwell upon the essence of teaching written composition successfully and give the commentary. About twenty years ago, while serving as Vice President of the National Council of Teachers of English, I was required to give a report on the state of the English profession. I sent a questionnaire to teachers of English, heads of English Departments, Librarians, judges, lawyers, political leaders, etc., asking them certain questions about the state of English teaching and success in achieving the goals indicated. Over 1,000 respondents gave their frank opinions about what was right and what was lacking about the teaching of English. Written English was one of the most criticized aspects of the entire English program. In addition to these opinions, I consulted almost every methods text on teaching written composition and read countless articles. Out of all this study eventually emerged the book, Attitudes toward English Teaching(Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1961).

It is interesting to note that recently in two separate documents prepared by professionals who were NOT English teachers, written English was once again singled out for criticism. At the annual meeting of the American Bar Association held in August 1979 in Dallas, a committee of that association studying changes in legal education advocated, in addition to other changes that in admitting students " law schools should give less weight to college grades on the law school admission test, ... and give " greater weight to such factors as writing ability, ability in oral communication, work habits, interpersonal skills, dependability and conscientiousness." (1). Furthermore the committee recommended that Law schools should give every student " at least one rigorous writing experience" in each of the three years of Law school."(2)

In the August 21, 1979 issue of the New York Times, Fred M. Hechinger in his column "About Education" devotes the entire column to a summary of a recent report compiled by the Committee for Corporate Support of Private Universities Inc. This report consists of replies from executives from 300 of the Fortune 1,000 industrical and financial institutions to many questions concerning the academic establishment and its relationship to business and finance. Mr. Hechinger notes, "... Almost all of the business leaders were critical of college graduates' reading and writing skills." (3)

I included the results of my survey of the methods of teaching written composition first in an article entitled "What Has Happened to Written Composition in the Past Fifty Years." (4) The one magic ingredient in teaching written composition I encountered time and time again was mentioned in the very first methods book on teaching English, G.A. Hinsdale's Teaching the Language Arts, written in 1896. He states:

> In composition it is peculiarly important to enlist the interest and pleasure of the pupil." (5) All is commentary.

We as teachers of English don't have to work very hard to enlist the interest and pleasure of our students to watch television or to do disco dancing, or take a day off and have a picnic. If we could find the magic formula to enlist the interest and pleasure of the pupil, ~~we would have the magic formula to enlist the interest and pleasure of the pupil,~~ we would have no problems in teaching writing in all its forms.

III. VARIATIONS AND COMMENTARY

What, then, can we do to enlist the interest and pleasure of our students? Here are my specific suggestions:

1. Speaking and listening and discussion should precede the writing process.
   No child writes masterpieces when the teacher says, "For tomorrow, you will all write a 500 word composition on "How I Take Care of My Dog or Cat or Horse or What Have You." Sometimes the discussion may take place over a period of days before the writing actually starts.
2. Provision should be made for individual interests, abilities, and skills.
   One topic, no matter how fascinating it may seem to the teacher, cannot possibly interest an entire class of 20. 30 or even more students, unless it be "How I Hate to Write a Required Composition."
3. Provide as many enriching experiences as possible, both within and without the classroom.
   Within the classroom we can have as stimulating experiences: literature, recordings, filmstrips, posters, anecdotes by teachers and/or fellow students, reports by resource persons(parents with interesting professions or occupations, various members of the community, other teachers or administrators who have travelled or who have had unusual life experiences, etc.)

From without the classroom there are such stimulating experiences as: assembly programs, field trips to places of interest, movies, plays, ballets, concerts, art exhibits; visits to other classrooms in the school; visits to other schools. Many an exciting classroom discussion can follow an interesting assembly program or field trip or visit to an exhibit. From such discussions many an interesting composition can arise.

4. Seize the opportunity to discuss anything in the news that will interest the class.

Keep a file of interesting clippings from newspapers and magazines and use them at the proper time. Urge your students to keep their own files of such material that might serve as stimuli for written work. For example, why not have a class in the senior year of high school discuss the two reports mentioned earlier in this article about the complaints about the writing skills uttered by lawyers and judges and business executives? Are they justified? Who is at fault if they are? What can the teacher do? What should the class do? Out of such discussion should come some valuable suggestions for teaching which might well open the eyes of the teacher!

5. There must be sufficient time for gestation of an idea or situation to take written form.

Even the greatest writers have had their empty days when words would not come forth. The most difficult word for the professional writer as he or she sits down at the typewriter every morning and faces the blank sheet of paper is that very first word. If you have read many biographies of writers you must recall the agony they feel when, try as they might, the words simply will not come forth. Sometimes, this impasse may last for days, weeks, and even months. Then suddenly the dam breaks, and the words flow in endless profusion. Think of Thomas Wolfe and his huge piles of typewritten manuscsipt which he brought to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, at Scribners. The editor had the hardest time of all his editorial experience to boil Wolfe's mountains of words down to manageable proportions.

Incidentally, when the words stop flowing for too long a time and the writer feels that he or she has written himself or herself out, then life may lose all of its meaning. This is precisely what happened to Ernest Hemingway when he realized that he had to give up (because of his abnormally high blood pressure and his inability to concentrate) all the things which had meant so much to him-- wine, good food, women, high adventure and the magic ability to put down his experiences into a bald and masculine prose. Life, apparently, meant nothing to him when he came to that realization, and he put an end to it.

In other words, even the greatest professional writers cannot always produce deathless prose on demand. Such was also the case with F. Scott Fitzgerald, and with so many of the other bright young men of the 1920's, the 1930's and later.

6. There should be opportunities to share one's written work.

Writing is a social process, as Sterling Andrus Leonard pointed out so long ago.(6) XXXXXXX It is the rare writer who does not wish to be published; and after being published, who does not want to have many of his books sold. No professional writer likes to have his books end up in the ramainder book stores and sell for a fraction of their original selling price. Students who have taken the time and trouble to express themselves as best they could in written form deserve to be "published." This usually takes the form of reading one's work before the entire class or to a smaller group if the writer is too shy to face a large group. Sometimes the student will read his or her composition only to the teacher(especially if the teacher is deemed sympathetic). Sometimes, he or she will not read it aloud at all, but will not mind handing it in to the teacher for his or her perusal. There are, then, many ways in which the student writer can have an audience in his class. Besides class compositions, students should be encouraged to participate in various other kinds of written expression . They should be encouraged to write letters to the editor of the school newspspen(if there is one); to the town newspaper(if there is one); to larger ne spapers, even of national circulation; to magazines such as TV Guide or Family Circle, or the various news magazines which their parents may subscribe to. The sooner a student experiences the pleasure of seeing his or her letter in print, the sooner will that hesitation to write for a strange and unseen audience disappear.

Encourage students to write to their political representative ; to send for things supplied by government and other agencies; to enter literary contents , like those sponsored by Scholastic magazines. Maureen Daly's short story "Sixteen," one of the most frequently anthologized short stories in modern times, won a contest sponsored by that magazine. Her novel, Seventeenth Summer , came out shortly after. Nathalia Crane had her first book of poems published at age twelve, The Janitor's Boy. Hilda Conkling, another verbal prodigy, used to recite her poems to her mother, Grace Hazard Conkling, a professor of English at Vassar, before Hilda could even write.

Although that famous training ground for many future authors, St. Nicholas Magazine no longer exists, each class, and certainly, each school should eventually have a newspaper and a literary magazine in which the students' most creative efforts can be published.

7. Evaluation

Once you have inspired children with a desire to write, you have the problem of evaluation. Some critics would have you believe that it is not necessary to correct any papers; that students will automatically learn to write by writing. I don't believe in this theory, attractive as it may sound from a time-saving and eye-saving point of view. Even the most accomplished professional writers have an editor in their publishing houses; and appreciate what the editor(if he or she is a good one) can do to improve the author's writing. Read some of the introductions to the various textbooks which you use, to see how much appreciation is usually given to editors of publishing houses. In one sense, the teacher is an expert editor, much more experienced than his or her students; presumably much more capable of knowing what is good or poor writing; and capable of knowing how to suggest ways to improve writing so that the very best of each student is brought out. Here, then, are some principles of evaluation to keep in mind.

a. The best evaluation is on a one to one basis. The greatest teacher of college composition in modern times was Charles Townsend Copeland of Harvard. He was so popular that his students called him Copey, and he did not mind it. Hundreds of famous writers, teachers, jurists, statesmen, etc. sat at his feet in freshman composition. He did not read and correct his students' papers. He would make appointments with them to come to his room in Seven Hall(still standing) and they would read their papers to him while he listened and gave his comments. Decades later, these students would treasure these meetings. Copeland was the only Harvard Professor who used to attract hundreds of graduates from all over the world who would come to his readings at Christmas time at the Harvard Club in New York City. When he became old and senile, his former students took good care of him and saw to it that at the home at which he resided in his last years, some one visited with him every day of his life. He lived to be ninety-four. Even when his memory began to fail, and he did not recognize his former students, he could still command their respect and even reverence to the very end.

b. Positive encouragement will go much further than negative criticism. Even the poorest paper may have something worthy of complimenting. If you will take the trouble to look for something to praise, you will find it. Writing a paper in ink, when the writer has previously never taken the trouble to even bring a pencil is worth remarking in a positive way.

c. Look for only a few errors at any one time. Specify what you will look for and urge your students to be sure that they make as few errors as possible in this aspect. Mopping a paper with red ink only

inhibits the writer. In 1911, one of the famous high school English teachers of his day, and a prolific textbook writer, Alfred H. Hitchcock, wrote a little paper called "A Composition on Red Ink," in which he urged teachers to look for only a few errors at one time. It was reprinted countless times and circulated in the tens of thousands of copies. Its common-sense suggestions are just as applicable today; and Holt, Rinehart & Winston, the original publishers, would be doing our profession a great service if they reprinted it and distributed it far and wide.

d. Sometimes students themselves are very good judges of the writing of their peers.

Criticisms that students will not accept from their teachers, they will accept from their peers. In this manner both the writers and their critics profit. On the one hand, authors learn to accept criticism graciously; while on the other hand the critics learn how to be constructive and not offensive. Who can ask for more from the professional book critics?

e Content is more important than mechanics -
Even the professional writer still needs an editor to correct his misspellings, his mistakes in punctuation, grammar, and technical English, not to mention the niceties of literary style. The writer who thinks he can write without correction has another guess coming. Remember what Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare, "It has been said by the players that Shakespeare never blotted a line. Would that he had blotted a thousand!"

f) Inspire in your students the pride in their work, so that they will not submit any shoddy work, but only what they consider to be their very best. Eudora Welty, the famous Southern novelist, was invited to speak at the Denver Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1958. She told me that she could not accept the invitation, much as she would have liked to, because her mother was gravely ill and Miss Welty felt that she could not give her speech the attention it deserved, if she were to address a group of English teachers. Years later she did accept and was a great success, even though she only read two of her famous short stories.

8. Reward excellence in writing as excellence in sports or in the arts is rewarded. Bulletin boards should display the best compositions. Assembly programs can feature one or more students reading their compositions. Students can make recordings of their compositions on cassettes and these can be played in lower classes as models of written expression. Try to get some local radio or TV station to invite students to read their work. Encourage the local newspaper to print the best compositions occasionally.

9). The Ambience for good written composition .

a) Make your English room as attractive as possible: Posters of foreign lands in which you have travelled; pictures that have inspired others to write, like Millet's "Man with the Hoe," which inspired Edwin Markam's poem of that title. The great writer Ruskin wrote his Seven Lamps of Architecture, The Stones of Venis and Mornings in Florence because he was inspired by the artistic beauties of these places. Early in this century, Dodd, Mead and Company published a series of volumes containing great works of literature which had been inspired by great paintings, great works of sculpture, great works of architecture, great works of nature, etc. Read some of descriptions and let students see reproductions of the works of art which inspired them. For example, get a large reproduction of Millet's "The Man with the Hoe" and read Edwin Markham's poem which brought him instant fame.

b) Provide proper reference books: dictionaries, biographical dictionaries, thesauri, books of quotations, etc.

c) Provide writing alcoves for those who like to be by themselves when they write. Some students can write in a classroom with twenty other students. Some write best in the quiet of their own rooms(if they are fortunate to have one). Some write best early in the morning, or late at night, or on week-ends. In short, try to respect the individuality of each of your students, as the individuality of any professional writer would be respected.

10. Grow with your subject

a)Books There are hundreds of books on the teaching of written composition. Read some of them. Do not be bound by your classroom textbooks, which may be old, out-of-date, or unsuitable to the needs and abilities of your class.

b) Professional membership. Join your local council of teachers of English; and if you can afford it, the National Council of Teachers of English. As an elementary school teacher, you will automatically receive Language Arts; on the secondary level you will receive the English Journal; on the college level there will be College English, College Composition and Communication , and English Education. Scores of articles on the teaching of written composition are written each year by experts in the field of teaching and gifted teachers. In addition, the N C T E publishes many pamphlets each year dealing with all phases of the English Language Arts, including written composition.

c) Attend the meetings of your local and, if possible, your national organization. As a learning experience, there is nothing like a professional convention to enrich your background, widen your horizons, and meet the leaders in your chosen field.

Perhaps I can best sum up all that I have said about the Magic Ingredient by quoting from a composition written by one of my high school students when I asked my class to write about the best English teacher they ever had or the worst English teacher they ever had. This young lady, now a successful novelist wrote about her best English teacher:

"

A teacher enamoured by the written word; a teacher and a student; one overwhelmed by the music of poetry, was the inspiration of many of the written words of my own.

Indeed what can be more effective than love, love for what you know and the desire to share it with your students? What can be more inspirational in the field of communication than the desire and the need to communicate? For myself, I can say that I have always written my best, and the most, when I had a teacher who cared. That is, a teacher who cared about what I had to say, a teacher receptive to my thoughts and my desires. To me this is the most important quality of any English teacher, or of any other subject, for that matter.

For writing is not mere techniques; it is a means of expression, of communication. And one is most inspired to express oneself, to communicate when one is encouraged to think and is assured of a recipient. This is the function of the English teacher. It is not merely to teach grammar-- this can be learned from any textbook--but to impress upon the student the importance of self-expression and communication and the satisfaction that can be realized only after this first step is allowed, if not encouraged.

The methods of accomplishing this are myriad, I am sure. There are probably as many methods as there are teachers. However, the importance, it seems to me is not the method, for this I expect comes naturally, when one has the patience to hear the awkward expressions of the student become words profound and meaningful." (7)

What better expression of the Magic Ingredient than has been so beautifully described by a student who has found it!

Footnotes

1. New York Times, August 16, 1979, p. A 10.

2. Ibid.

3. Fred M. Hechinger, "Survey Finds Business Backs Free Inquiry," New York Times, August 21, 1979, p. C 4.

4. Now included as Chapter 13 in my book, The English Teacher: Basic Traditions and Succesful Innovations. Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1977, pp.114-119.

5. B.A. Hinsdale, Teaching the Language Arts. New York: D. Appleton, 1896, p.117.

6. Sterling Andrus Leonard, English Composition as a Social Problem. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917.

7. The English Teacher, pp. 118-119.